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# TWENTY SONNETS

*By*

MURIEL MILLER  
HUMPHREY





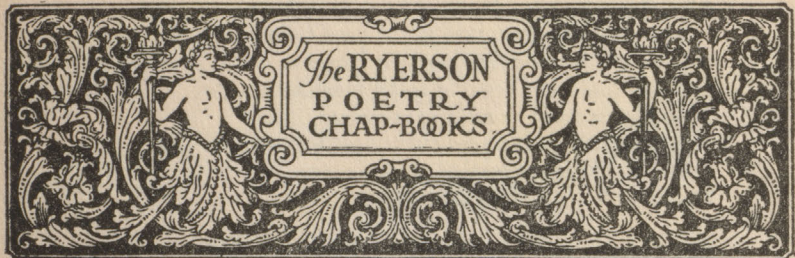
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# Twenty Sonnets

*By Muriel Miller Humphrey*

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## JOY HAS ITS LITTLE DAY

### A SEQUENCE

#### I

**N**OW I rejoice when men proclaim me fair,  
 Now I am glad when they bespeak me praise;  
 The air is ringing with my roundelays  
 And I have said farewell to all despair.  
 Joy dwells with me, no burden do I bear,  
 The snow-bent trees again their branches raise,  
 The sun soars higher these long, shriven days  
 And I have turned me from sour-visaged care.

All things most lovely now I claim for mine;  
 I dwell with beauty that I fair may grow,  
 Each day I strive some added grace to show,  
 Making my gift more precious at your shrine.  
 The days join hands, nor night breaks through their line  
 Since, my beloved, your love for me I know.



## II

All nature sings her love yet your love lies  
 Too deep for song, you say; I read your fear  
 That all this overflowing love I bear  
 For you could not breathe forth melodious sighs,  
 Thus clothe itself in metrical replies,  
 Ripple and gush thus lightly past the weir  
 Of your long silences, were it sincere,  
 Had it in life's profoundest depth its rise.

Ah! Measure not my love by my frail rhymes  
 For these are but the petals of the flower,  
 Or the spray, wind-flecked from the sea's great dower;  
 From buried roots the blossom-fragrance climbs,  
 Roots that drink tears from heaven's sun-drawn shower—  
 Such tears add measure to the ocean's chimes.



## III

My words are but the ripples on the lake  
 Born of the wafting breeze of passing thought,  
 Although they gleam and darken they tell nought  
 Of silences unsounded for your sake.  
 Yet on my constancy you dare not stake  
 Your hope! But tell me if you know of aught  
 Denying my heart's depth thus meekly brought  
 For your approving glance to heal its ache.

You may fling any cruel word to plumb  
 This hidden depth, my love will softly close  
 About, hiding it there; or you may come  
 Yourself and dive in vain, far down to those  
 Undreamed-of glades where you could ever roam  
 And still not reach the depth that my heart knows.



#### IV

Beloved, though fate may hold in store for us  
 Her last device, her most corroding care,  
 Though she dishonour us and leave us bare  
 Of reputation, though she reimburse  
 Our toil with poverty, although she curse  
 The transient dreams of sleep with hell's despair,  
 Though all we value may find other heir,  
 Our hopes be as the fruit of Tantalus,—

Yet still we could not reckon all our joy;  
 Our love will ever metamorphose pain  
 As memoried kisses will outvalue gain  
 And rarest hope resolve to outgrown toy.  
 This "Now," censorious future shall not stain  
 Nor sophistries our proven faith destroy.



#### V

Where love is perfect must love be betrayed  
 To prove love's white perfectioning, like noon  
 That marks no crest it passes not as soon  
 As touched, or mountain pass that tops the grade  
 But to descend anon? Adagio,  
 Pain-throbbing heart of human symphony,  
 Ever divides the mounting ecstasy  
 Of life's allegro, life's prestissimo.  
 As perfect love is not where is no pain  
 Nor ever peace dissevered from unrest;  
 As faith grows cold with doubt left unconfessed,  
 Purity meaningless were there no stain;  
 So love itself must ever be betrayed  
 Walking clear-eyed into love's ambushade.



## VI

Joy has its little day and then it dies,  
 Short-lived as any bravely opulent flower  
 That hails the sun, scatters its perfumed dower  
 And is no more; as iridescent flies  
 Winging pursue the azure-tinted skies,  
 Live, love and die in one pellucid hour,  
 Transient as dew which morning beams devour,  
 Brief as the crimson glow at day's demise.

Joy is not life, for life is mutely slow,  
 Groping in dank, worm-groovèd earth to sight;  
 Helplessly patient through unquickened night  
 Made but the darker by the firefly's glow.  
 O Life, burn out in one supreme delight!  
 And Love's own breath this flame to beauty blow!



## VII

Do you, like me, belovèd, play a part,  
 Taking life's half-joys, love's economies,  
 With gratitude or faint complacencies  
 That love has not deflowered the paltry heart  
 Of all affectionings? Do you, dear, start  
 In pain when small, trespassing memories  
 Encroach upon the soul's ignoble peace  
 Probing again love's wound with poisoned dart?

—Poisoned with thoughts of frail unworthiness  
 To bear the woe of love! 'Tis agony  
 Thus to be called to life's high offices  
 And proved of too-small faith! No charity,  
 Human or yet divine, can ever bless  
 Hearts that betray Love's white ascendancy.



## THE SILVER FLUTE

THE long shy boy caressed the silver thing,  
Breathed his young breath along its shining length,  
His slender fingers with translucent strength  
Twinkled expectant keys. Hark! round notes cling  
And drop—clear, passionless, pure melody;  
No chordal crash, no swelling overtones,  
No strident brass nor dirge-like hymnal drones,  
No winding, contrapuntal harmony,

But cool, white notes that fall in tonal place  
And time, and make a cloister of the room.—  
Slip back the centuries, shy boy, and space  
Your melodies where dancing maidens grace  
Green swords. You dare too far when you presume  
To pipe such mode to this noise-harried race.



## FOG AT LEYSIN\*

THE EARTH still sleeps, the mist obscures the sun,  
No sudden dawn blots its illumined grass  
With long tree-shadows; stealthily hours pass.  
But garden-dial leaves its task undone,  
It tallies not how slowly minutes run  
Along the day; the sombre window-glass,  
Like aged eyes, is dull; no clouds amass,  
They spread the pastures ravelled and unspun.

Why this malingering, O Helios?  
Our days are muted to a monotone.  
Come! Shine your presence though the shadows thrown  
May fall athwart our peace or, treacherous,  
Shorten until, deceived and credulous,  
We claim health ours, believing pain is flown.

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\* The sun-cure clinics.



## UNDER TREES

**G**OD talks with me when I am under trees  
And limns his golden words upon the skies;  
I murmur inarticulate replies  
And would assume the eloquence of ease  
Feeling his flowered breath in every breeze;  
But he turns on me his hot, radiant eyes  
With warbled laughter rung in birdling cries  
And soothes my infantile timidities.

And then I know he needs not prayer nor psalm  
But hears me best in this unvocal praise  
Far from cathedral, home or market-place  
Where, hushed, I pause beside the lake's blue calm.  
Here he enfolds me in his great green arm  
And spills baptismal tears upon my face.



## ALCESTIS

To H. G.

**A**LCESTIS! You have said your fond farewell  
And now you lie alone on your white bed,  
Far from the scenes of life. Dull fires are fed  
With summer's leaves; out from the mist a bell  
Tolls solemnly; black fear stands sentinel  
Lest you should rise impatiently and shed  
Your pall, again to eat the living bread  
Of home. Accept this fate. Do not rebel.

Then, dear Alcestis, bounding Heracles,  
God of all strength, will come again with Spring  
To take you by the hand and lead you home.  
Rest quietly. Resting take cold Winter's ease;  
The flowers sleep, the birds are not on wing,  
The rills are mute, yet summer soon will come.



## RENASCENCE

**A**M I laid here that I may watch the skies  
And free my vision from encumbering wall?  
I gaze above earth-rooted tree and small  
Ambitious bird that shatters as it flies  
Blue silences into white ecstasies  
Of sound, but whose frail wing at last must fall  
Again to grass;—above the ants that crawl  
Their busy ways within brief boundaries.

Immobile, with a body weak for use  
I lie; then as the spot-light sun is dimmed  
Far galaxies of countless stars are gemmed  
Upon the scene; freed from the sun's abuse  
Space-time flows on, mind is no longer hemmed  
By imaged gods, but outspans Christ and Zeus.



## THE LITTLE ROOM

**T**HE HOUSE recedes, soft-shadowed, cool, austere,  
Above, about, beneath this little room,  
The cherished heart of home whence we chase fear,  
Grief, bitterness; without we shut the gloom  
Of an October eve where raindrops tap  
Their dirge to Autumn, where the shivering trees  
Open their twisted fingers to unwrap  
Shy leaves which fall with whispered litanies.  
O glowing little room, sheltering, warm,  
Close your four walls about our loving peace;  
Guard us from season's change, from raiding storm,  
From cold betrayal save our intimacies. . . .  
Alas! here too the echo, "Earth to earth"  
Breaks on our love and silences our mirth.



## FEBRUARY SPRING

FEBRUARY, there is winter in my heart:  
Veil your bold sun with drifting snow and spread  
Your sky with cloud to mourn with me this dread  
Bereaving. Why do you thus early start  
Young Spring's awakening lilt? You know my part  
Is grief; you know that numbed and seeming-dead  
I wait the voice I silenced, the quick tread  
Upon the stair, the joy I fain would thwart.

Spill out your snows again and send your cold,  
Delay the year's exultant acolyte,  
Forbid he flame the candles of the trees  
Or sing the happy glorias of old,  
Arrest the birds' exuberant northern-flight.  
O, tarry Spring until my heart knows ease!



## SNOW IN APRIL

FRAIL fugitives upon an idling breeze,  
Painting the hour a fantasy of greys,  
The drifting snow-flowers weave an ordered maze  
From cloud to earth, captured at times by trees  
Whose fingers clutch the fragile mysteries.  
Be still! Earth holds her breath. The silence sways  
Voluptuously, singing in soundless praise,  
For quickening now are June's gratuities.

Be still! Let not a fluttered wing disturb  
The heavy peace which now envelops us;  
Like nature sleep until the Angelus  
Of petalled bells, the wind in fragrant herb,  
Glad flutings, rush of rivers valorous,  
Shall celebrate again the birth superb.



## TO SPRING

**T**HRUST from the frozen earth young spears of green,  
Pierce through the grief-numbered heart some pointed hope,  
Cut from imprisoned dreams the fretting rope  
That caution knots; with fleet-foot winds, young, clean,  
Sweep out Lord Winter's derelict demesne;  
With early rain-drops spray the wooded slope  
Where buried mayflowers, half-discouraged, grope  
To light, and send the mating birds to preen.

Let winter pass! Now reign, young Spring, instead,  
We are awearied of this frozen rule.  
Call forth the flowers; now fringe the woodland pool  
And gem the fingers of the trees with red;  
Hang your blue arras in the skies and spread  
The grass you weave from your unmeasured spool.



## THE VIOLIN

**T**HE TREE, content though inarticulate,  
Reached its mute branches to its god, the sun;  
It did not reck its ultimate estate  
But ringed its girth with each four seasons won;  
The axeman came and laid its forehead low,  
Then Stradivarius took its silent heart  
To shape—but how did his white genius know  
To turn this curving bubble with such art?  
Gold-bellied, fragile, it unbreathing lies  
Till, with cords woven from a slaughtered sheep,  
He strings his instrument.—O anguished cries,  
The forest wails and ewes bereaved weep.—  
Turn the black screws and strike with tautened bow,  
Only in pain may viol's music flow.



## THE TELEPHONE

**E**ROS, did you in sport one day invent  
This tortuous thing? How many lovers curse  
To bless again the mocking instrument?  
I see your elfish smile as I rehearse  
The mystic numeral and turn the dial  
Four varying arcs, then, breathless, wait the voice  
Beloved. No answer! Eros, no denial!  
Vibrate the wire that two hearts may rejoice.  
. . . . The moments toll, the silence spreads a shroud  
Over dead hopes; bereaved I wander round  
Seeking a dream to weave anew when loud  
The strident bell splinters the air to sound.—  
Eros, I take your toy, this telephone,  
And hear his inimitable "My own."



## ISOLDE TO TRISTRAM

**G**O, leave me now while friendship still is sweet,  
While I can greet you with unfluttered breast  
And take your hand letting our glances meet  
Affectionately, with guileless, happy zest.  
Sweet, go from me before I grow too fond,  
While I can say goodbye without regret,  
Ere Love, the over-riding lord, abscond  
With peace and put my honour in his debt.  
O Pain! . . . No, stay! Stay with me yet awhile!  
Nay, go! Go quickly ere I bid you wait.  
O heart betrayed! See Love triumphant smile  
Since I his victory thus accelerate.  
I could not know that Love's most magic key  
Was friends' Goodbye,—his Open Sesame.



## VALE

NOW could I leave one line of loveliness  
Immortal, one consummate word that might  
Give birth to peace, one joy that would requite  
The friends whose open hearts, whose high largess  
Have dowered my life with joy; could One but bless  
My lips that they in golden sound should cite  
These things, my pen that flaming it could write  
Love's lesson where all ages have access,

No other heaven would I ask than this;  
Then softly I would rest, impenitent  
Of fault, for sin it is makes eloquent  
Our lovely need of human tenderness;  
Then I would lie in death's imprisonment  
Knowing my span of earth in heaven was spent.



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